

## Media/Society: Remapping the Field

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## Preface

Theory, whatever the beliefs of individual theorists to the contrary, always exists in history. This study is no different. I write at a moment when major changes are taking place in world history and in the intellectual comprehension of the world. In the Soviet Union, eastern Europe, and China, momentous events demonstrate that old models and static views of those societies (from outside and from within) simply don't hold up any longer. In the developing nations change appears now as a permanent and conflicted process, not an instant postcolonial liberation. The promises of modernization face unexpected realities such as revived religious fundamentalism in Islam, while civilian democracy in Latin America balances uneasily with military reaction. In the capitalist core, major realignments of economic relations continue while political and social processes undergo <sup>significant</sup> massive alterations. World wide interdependency appears not only in nuclear military forces and shifting economic realities but also in regional political conflicts and global environmental crises. In all these situations the media play an increasingly important role in social and political transformation, and the political dimension of cultural change becomes more dramatic.

ecology  $\begin{cases} \text{20 yrs.} \\ \text{TW} \end{cases} \parallel \begin{matrix} \text{Capitalist} \\ \text{Industrial} \end{matrix}$

In the 20th century, mass communications and the industrial production of culture developed faster and further in North America and West Europe than elsewhere in the world. Many of the problems and possibilities of industrial/commercial mass culture became acute issues for individuals and institutions. In the 60s and 70s a new radical analysis of mass culture developed in the capitalist core countries: first in the area of cinema and then branching out to television and the other mass media, popular music, and related cultural practices. This new intellectual direction drew on an older Marxist and politically radical tradition which rested on a class analysis. <sup>As it grew ~~from~~ ~~the~~</sup> But it also drew on the insights of revived <sup>of 70s-80s</sup> and new social-political movements: the gender-based analysis of feminists and homosexuals; the race, ethnic, and national understanding of Black, Latino, Asian, and native peoples; the anti-nuclear understanding of a resurgent peace and disarmament movement in Europe; the environmentalist awareness of local, regional, and global ecology. And it grew from a New Left which often insolently rejected the Old, but which understood, if only on a gut level, that the verities of mid-century Marxism were inadequate to the realities of the times.

This book examines the current evolving state of radical media/theory recognizing it as in-process. I consider the major issues developed in cinema and video studies and related areas of mass culture because those areas first focussed key concerns. An expanded Marxism, concerned with the interaction of class with gender, race, and national and other factors provides the momentum for new media and cultural analysis. Arguing that creative work as well as abstract intellectual analysis contributes to our

and increasingly  
a collapse of categories —  
"infotainment" print/a-v/etc. music

understanding of the media environment, I take the artist as seriously as the theorist.

impose this  
last 11 into  
3 1/2's

This study brings together aesthetics and sociology, two intellectual disciplines normally kept apart, across the field of media, an area which resists understanding by reference only to art or only to social science. To traditional thinkers, Marxist and not, schooled in disciplinary boundaries and content to graze those fields, this is heretical. But to those whose questions and imaginations seek fresh answers, to those who try to account for contemporary films and videos, it is taken for granted that knowledge cannot stop at the conventional limits of traditional academic departments. In fact media studies in the capitalist West have expanded in quantity and quality precisely through boldly crossing boundaries and emerging in the fusion of different concerns.

Inevitably my configuration of the field reflects my own position as an intellectual in the U.S. left from the 1960s to the 1990s. more? short-

blo?

yes - comp. lit. Nicaraguan art practice

U.S. - main pt. / area of devel. but - comp w other cap. countries applicability to devel. world.

Intended audience: activists, artists, intellectuals (not necessarily separate categories) in capitalist, socialist, and developing worlds. Different emphases, lessons, tasks and priorities for each, but the need for an international radical understanding of media arts grows more crucial and more obvious all the time. elaborate?

students?  
public?  
policy makers? movement strategists?

? part of preface? appendix?  
yes no

## notes for a personal history of radical cultural theory

### basic theses

1. theory and practice cannot be separated
2. theoretical work is almost always presented as the sequential unfolding of a pattern producing organic unity--the final state is equated with answering all the problems, or the penultimate state is described with a short horizon into the future; this "history" hides contradictions and other possibilities, errors made along the way, personal histories and idiosyncratic features, etc.
3. when theoretical development is described in a personal history, it tends to be the self aggrandizing story of the (male) hero.

Because the analysis of cultural theory usually contains a history written in the abstract, students new to the subject are often misled. It seems that there is only one history (unless or until one reads other, competing, versions). It seems that this history just unfolds with one theorist or theoretical essay following on another, improving, correcting or building on the previous ones. The entire sequence has a trajectory leading to the present of the history which makes it very clear and logical as to why we are "here" where we are in present theory, and what tasks await us.

Such a history is basically teleological, that is it contains its end point in the very beginning, and everything leads up to that logical ending. And it erases what it considers to be false starts, dead ends and unproductive sidetracks. The result is a "cleaned up" version of theory which makes it seem machine like in its precision and predictability.

Now the reasons for this are easy to understand. For the individual theorist writing such an overt history (or writing a description of a particular subject, problem or issue with a covert history built in) tidies up the situation and makes it more palatable for students, who after all

don't need to know every damn detail and those details are usually only followed assiduously by other specialists (often competitors for jobs, grants, prestige, etc.) anyway. It also makes the situation easier for the theorist to hold in mind, in makes the path followed seem oh so clear and logical, rather than messy, meandering, and shaped by accident, circumstance, and the petty jealousies and bickerings of people working in the same area. But the net result is to give the student a false idea of how theorizing actually takes place and how the field advances (or at least maintains enough intellectual Brownian motion to seem like its a seething cauldron of new thought rather than a stagnating pond of commonplaces oozing into doxia). Armed with this false idea, the bright young theorist steps forth to slay a few dragons, but more often ends up tilting at windmills.

Therefore, my concerns in writing this little personal version of intellectual history are to humanize the process of theory making/building/development, so that its actual process becomes imaginable<sup>1</sup> and to mark the engagement with theory as inevitably and best (if we are not to approach it with the bad faith of careerism or the stupidity of two dimensional mapping of a four dimensional field) when involving overlapping concerns, gradual and uneven development, and erratic meandering. But, of course, this may just be self justification of my own style of working.

further discussion of decentering, marginalization, etc.

## topics

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<sup>1</sup>I can still remember how useful I found the intellectual "curriculum vitae" at the end of **Counter-Statement** in suggesting the actual intellectual terrain covered by the theorist, and later Ellen Cantarow's political-intellectual tracing of her development in **Politics of Literature** (Kampf and Lauter) get info. There is a certain egotism, self interest and self-styled heroism in such work, inevitably, but we live still in the age of the Romantic individual, and the personal history remains one of our most powerful and expressive means of self and social examination.